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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 NEW DELHI 002348

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [MASS IN](#) [NSSP](#)

SUBJECT: PM: PREMATURE TO COMMENT ON F-16S

REF: NEW DELHI 2301

Classified By: Ambassador David C. Mulford. Reasons 1.4 (B, D)

1. (C) Summary: Since Reftel, comments from senior GOI officials and governing coalition politicians on the Administration's March 25 South Asia Initiative continue to trickle out. The focus of remarks on March 28 was almost exclusively on F-16s to Pakistan, rather than the larger issues the proposal raises. Utterances ranged from careful to negative, with the PM taking the high road -- that it was premature to comment and that the offer would be discussed with Washington. Defense Minister Mukherjee said the sale was "inappropriate and ill-timed," and would adversely affect the Indo-Pak Composite Dialogue. Foreign Minister Natwar Singh said the F-16 matter was for the Defense Ministry to decide, while Congress Party spokesman Anand Sharma said the offer was "unfortunate," but "the government's responsibility." Former BJP/NDA Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh termed the offer "strange." The Communists are howling with outrage, and congresses by three major Left parties in the next two weeks could turn up the heat on the GOI.

2. (C) Today's fixation on the F-16s is unfortunate, but a Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS) meeting on the evening of March 29 may provide a more considered GOI position. These public statements provide early context and frame the issue, but the political process will decide the huge issues at stake here, which in the best case could redefine India's strategic orientation and international partners. The Ambassador has conducted daily PD briefings -- today with editors, columnists, and foreign correspondents -- to ensure that our positive story is being covered. Positive editorial comment continues. We will be reporting extensively on the political, military, economic, and public diplomacy dimensions of this process as it unfolds in the weeks and months ahead. End Summary.

PM: Premature to Comment

3. (U) Following his March 25 expression of "great disappointment" at the prospect of sale of F-16s to Pakistan, the PM parried the issue on March 28, saying it was "premature to comment." He said he did not know the terms and conditions of the offer, or what India would be getting, but advised that the issue would be discussed with Washington.

Mukherjee: Ill-timed

4. (U) Expanding on March 26 remarks, Defense Minister Pranab Mukherjee called the US F-16 decision "inappropriate and ill-timed" given that India and Pakistan were involved in a Composite Dialogue (CD). Speaking in Calcutta, a bastion of communist strength, he argued that the aircraft were not used for fighting terrorism, but for waging full-fledged war, and asserted that a sale would have an adverse impact on the CD and on Indo-Pak relations, and "might jeopardize" confidence building measures.

Congress and Natwar: Let Defense Decide

5. (U) Congress spokesman Anand Sharma made the first public statement for his party on March 28, calling the announcement "unfortunate and disappointing," and suggesting that the US was violating its own policy and global norms and undermining international law and US law. Calling the offer "worrying," and highlighting Pakistan's record as a proliferator, he hoped that the US Congress would take this into account. Asked whether the UPA government should accept the offer of F-16s and F-18s, Sharma took a pass, saying that Congress wanted to improve Indo-US relations, but that it was "for the government to decide." On March 28, Foreign Minister Natwar Singh parried a question on F-16s, commenting, "The Defense Ministry has to decide. Ask them."

BJP: Strange

6. (U) On March 29, former Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh termed the offer of F-16s to Pakistan "strange." Observing that New Delhi was not begging for arms, he argued that India has emerged as a power to be reckoned with on its own strength, and not because of any patron or sponsor. He slammed the UPA government's handling of the issue, because

the PM and Mukherjee were speaking in discordant voices. Jaswant found "no logic" in the position that the US was offering weapons to India and Pakistan because of an improvement in relations between them.

Communists Howling

17. (U) The CPM Politburo warned the government on March 28 to reject the aircraft offer outright. Washington was trying to draw India into a strategic military relationship, and was fueling an arms race in South Asia for the benefit of the US arms industry. Questioning the reliability of the US as a supplier, the CPM insisted that India pursue an independent foreign policy and forge closer relations with other countries, including China.

18. (C) The F-16s and the larger issue of closer relations with Washington are expected to come up at three important conferences/congresses of Left parties which support the UPA coalition from the outside in the next several weeks. The most important will be the CPM National Congress April 6-11 in New Delhi. The pro-Moscow CPI congress will take place in Chandigarh March 29-April 3, followed by another conference by the Forward Bloc April 4-5 in New Delhi.

Comment

19. (C) It is unfortunate that Mukherjee and governing party politicians in recent days have focused on the F-16s to Pakistan issue rather than on the larger Initiative, but a more considered opinion may emerge from a CCS meeting scheduled for late on March 29. These public remarks are of course merely the early salvos in what is likely to be a long period of debate and decision making. They are useful, however, in providing early context and for framing the issue, but the domestic political process will be much more important in deciding the huge issues at stake here, which in the best case could redefine India's strategic orientation and international partners.

10. (C) The Ambassador has conducted daily PD briefings -- today with editors, columnists, and foreign correspondents -- to ensure that our positive story is being covered. Editorial opinion in the major national dailies continues to be largely positive, with the "Indian Express" arguing on March 28 that the Indian political class risked missing the main point -- the rare US offer to help make India a world power -- and that New Delhi should consider the offer seriously "to test American intentions," concluding that "if the GOI were to scoff at this idea, it would indicate myopia of a very high order." Mission will be reporting extensively on the political, military, economic, and public diplomacy dimensions of this process as it unfolds in the weeks and months ahead.

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